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ABSTRACT

This study examines changes in parents' marriages following older-child adoption, using in-depth interviews with seven couples prior to and following placement. The interviews indicated that parents' experiences followed similar patterns. Children's acting-out behavior and their ability to exploit parents' vulnerabilities placed stress on the marriages. The need to accommodate children's needs meant reduced time for the couple relationship and increased focus on the parent relationship. Findings also indicated that social supports permitting down time enhanced the marriage. Post-adoption marital satisfaction was also associated with fulfillment of pre-placement expectations of the spouse concerning housework and child care. Adoption emphasized both strengths and weaknesses of relationships. The findings posed implications for adoption agency practice, including: questions for the couple relationship; considerations of the time factor in new parenthood; and the nature of the couple's support systems. (Contains 33 references.) (JPB)

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OLDER-CHILD ADOPTION AND THE NEW PARENTS' MARRIAGE:

INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

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OLDER-CHILD ADOPTION AND THE NEW PARENTS' MARRIAGE: INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

ABSTRACT

Changes in parents' marriages following older-child adoption were explored through in-depth interviews with seven couples prior to and following placement. Children's acting-out behavior and their ability to exploit parents' vulnerabilities stressed marriages. The need to accommodate children's care needs (including being on constant call) meant reduced time for the couple relationship and increased focus on the parent relationship. Social supports permitting "down time" enhanced the marriage. Post-adoption marital satisfaction was also associated with fulfillment of preplacement expectations of the spouse around housework and child care. Adoption emphasized both strengths and weaknesses of relationships. The paper also discusses needed research and implications for practice.

KEYWORDS: transition to parenthood, marital satisfaction, older-child adoption

OLDER-CHILD ADOPTION AND THE NEW PARENTS' MARRIAGE: INTERVIEWS WITH PARENTS

What happens to their marriage when a couple adopt an older child? This is not an idle question. Children who have already suffered major relationship losses and often severe family conflict need stability both for damage repair and for healthy development. One key to this stability is the adoptive parents' own relationship. Yet, little is known about the impact of older-child adoption on the new parents' marriage. One author, writing about biological parenthood, states, "Sometime after wives give birth to babies, their husbands become daddies. A husband and wife will never look at each other the same way again" (Zarnow, 1990, p. 136). The same is undoubtedly true of adoptive parents; parenthood reveals aspects of our partners that we never really knew before. As one adoptive parent stated during an interview, "It brings out the best in people, brings out their worst."

BACKGROUND TO INTERVIEWS WITH ADOPTIVE PARENTS

There has been considerable research into first-time biological parenthood, including its impact on the marital relationship (e.g., Belsky & Kelly, 1994; Cowan & Cowan, 1992). Most investigations have found a modest decline in marital satisfaction from pregnancy to post-birth. Many couples who adopt have fertility problems and these are also negatively related to marital life quality (Abbey, Andrews, & Halman, 1994; Abbey, Halman, & Andrews, 1993). Few research studies specifically consider the transition to adoptive parenthood, let alone its impact on the marital relationship. Those that do so focus on infant adoptions; no significant differences have been reported between adoptive and biological parents (Cook, 1988; Humphrey &

Kirkwood, 1982; McCaghren & Jackson, 1986).

Only one longitudinal study has looked at marital relations of parents who adopted children beyond infancy. Beginning in 1987, Conn-Blowers and Spronk (1993), under the auspices of the Alberta (Canada) Department of Family and Social Services, sent questionnaires to new adoptive parents of older children. By summer 1990, responses were received from 103 families who had adopted 130 children. Follow-up questionnaires, individualized to fit family circumstances, were periodically sent to each family. A final letter, mailed in February 1992, requesting additional information about positive and negative changes in family circumstances brought only 21 replies. Parents were asked, among other things, what changes had occurred in their spousal relationship. In some cases husband-wife relations improved. Most couples who were new to childrearing or who had accepted a child more difficult than any already in their home said that time together was very restricted. Many discussed the importance of communication, especially when they had manipulative children. Some couples felt that, early in placement, they had become more distant, although later they partially reorganized priorities. Two couples nearly separated as a result of stress from their adopted children. One couple parenting three very disturbed children wrote:

> Our relationship has changed. One spouse feels failure in the parental role and less worthy as a person because of this failure. The other finds it difficult to separate the relationship with the spouse from the relationship with the children. It is as if failure in the parent-child relationship could lead to failure in the spousal relationship (Conn-Blowers & Spronk, 1993, p. 19).

There are several difficulties with the Alberta study. There is no information on the number of

couples reporting on their marital relationship or on the interval after placement that they did so. In addition, there is little attempt to relate possible influences to marital outcomes. These limitations were due, in part, to a lack of funding (T. Spronk, personal communication, March 31, 1995).

Several adoption outcome studies have included retrospective questions about the impact of adoption on parents' marriages (Grow & Shapiro, 1974; Kadushin, 1970; Simon & Altstein, 1981). The results were mixed. Most parents reported that their marriages were happier. Parents whose marriages deteriorated often found themselves on opposite sides of issues affecting their adopted children (Simon & Altstein, 1981).

A mail survey I conducted in an earlier attempt to explore the impact of adoption on parents' marriages was inconclusive. Respondents included individuals who had adopted recently and those whose children were grown, those who had adopted healthy infants and those whose children were older or had other special needs. The only conclusions possible were that more research was needed and that the best approach was through interviews that explored parents' experiences in depth rather than through more superficial questionnaires (Ward & Tremitiere, 1991).

From 1993 to 1995, I conducted interviews with couples prior to adoptive placement and six months or more after the new child was in the home. Although I restricted my interviews to couples asking for an in-country adoption of a single child of the same race aged five or over without severe physical or intellectual disabilities and without major psychiatric problems, the actual children placed were quite varied. The small number of families (eleven initially, seven at reinterview) and the diversity of children precludes anything but an impressionistic analysis of

the material. Nevertheless, parents' experiences of the impact of parenthood, more particularly the impact of older child adoption, on their own relationship can provide clues both to needed research and to interventions that may support the marriage.

THE PARENTS' EXPERIENCES

The foundation--the marriage relationship

Before a couple adopts a child, their own relationship exists and has existed through time. In their day-to-day interactions and in their mode of meeting challenges and crises, they have established a unique family pattern. Each relationship, in order to continue its existence, must have something, some kind of attractor, that exerts a pull to hold members together. Gottman (1991, 1993), who has studied both long-time marriages and divorce, has identified such an attractor, which he calls a sense of "we-ness." The couples who told me their stories all expressed a strong sense of "we-ness." For example, when asked about the best times in their marriages, several couples agreed in naming specific events or activities: travel together, doing things together, having a new child. The key aspect appeared to be sharing the experience rather than solely individual pleasure. For most people, the best times in their marriage were "just being together," being "really a lot in tune," "sharing time with each other."

A couple's history includes difficulties they have faced. What had these problems been among the adoptive families? How did partners respond to perturbations coming either from within or outside their relationship? There appeared to be two varieties of worst times, related in differing ways to their commitment to couple identity. The first involved some disaster that jointly befell the couple: infertility, a planned adoption that fell through before placement,

illness and death in the immediate or extended family, or (eventually) adoption disruption. In some of these families, a sense of couple solidarity was cemented through overcoming difficulties together. For example, one husband stated, "We helped each other through the hard times--and the good times." Another put it more eloquently:

> It's just the strong emotional and tender nights we spent together there crying and, you know, just holding one another and waking up the next day and getting on with our life, knowing that the other one would be there for you, no matter what. That's definitely made us a stronger couple.

In two families, the demands of coping with the severe illness of a child, rather than drawing partners together, drove a wedge between them. Following the death of their severely disabled biological son, one woman felt that her husband, who was relieved that the stress was finally over, "could at least be sympathetic here and shed a tear or two." Following the out-of-town hospitalization of their son another father, who had stayed with him, stated, "We were very distant to each other....We had to re-get to know each other all over again." A second group reported that their worst time involved a break in the sense of "we-ness" because they had lost their shared purpose. For example, according to one woman, she and her husband slipped "into a pattern where you're not coming together enough to have a really vibrant relationship" because they were involved in so many separate activities, and another reported that her husband "just wasn't on the same wave length as I am as far as what we both wanted in the marriage and needed from each other." Where a rift developed, the couples rebuilt their sense of connectedness, by their own efforts, through prayer, or with the help of a therapist. In the process they developed a new understanding of each other, became re-acquainted, or set joint

priorities in order to re-create the lost "we-ness."

Although partners often emerged from the worst times with a higher level of commitment to their marriage, they still bore scars and sensitivities. For example, the one wife was adamant that she could not parent another child with serious disabilities. Notable, of course, is the continuing pain of infertility, which has been called "a crisis with no resolution" (Butler & Koraleski, 1991, p. 151). One man, for instance, said that his wife "knows deep down inside that she still can't have kids, I can." Even in less dramatic cases, couples remained wary of situations that could disrupt the "we-ness" again. Some consciously worked at keeping their priorities in line with each other, for example in terms of planning for life after children.

Family patterns appear in decision-making styles which existed in the past and are carried forward into adoptive parenthood. Two examples serve to illustrate. In the first, before they had children, one couple discussed how the decision to adopt compared with others they had made.

He: Is it any different from the way we usually make decisions?

She: Probably not. We do our pro and our con.

He: Sat down and made a list of all the benefits.

She: Play on all the scenarios and in the end, we pray and we kind of try and reach down to our heart and feel what's really right and in the end just have to make a life leap, you know, leap of faith and hope it turns out okay.

Even in small decisions concerning their children following placement, they used much the same process, as I observed when they chose a child to set the table. They also reported going off to confer quickly on how to manage unexpected child behavior. Another family's style was quite different. The wife was the information gatherer; she talked with knowledgeable people and read

informative books. In spite of her husband's relative silence during interviews, he was the one who apparently signalled decisions. As she reported:

> I think probably he is more the decision-maker person. Because I like to think about things and be sure about things before I do things. He says, "If we wait until you're sure, why, we'll never do this."

When it came to dealing with their new son's behavior, the father again shaped their decisions: she suggested strategies and he tailored them to their situation.

Enter the child

The addition of a new member heralds change within the whole family system. Because the additional individual has physical, emotional, and social care needs which require adjustments in family time and space arrangements and in individual and group interactions, the pre-existing steady state of the family (including the nature of marital interaction) can no longer be maintained. The needs and behaviors of the new child, or other new member, must be accommodated. Even when an adult or near adult is added, adjustments are necessary. For example, one mother commented that, although the live-in helper during the summer provided the parents with a needed degree of freedom, they experienced an unwelcome drop in privacy. Similarly, another talked about the adjustments necessary when her mother-in-law had moved in some time earlier. Children place even greater demands on their parents, as one mother said about the task facing new parents:

> Like I said before it's a juggling act. I think of it as like a steady state before the kids had come. You know, you developed patterns of living and doing things that are fine, where

you've worked out your ways of coping and getting along and then you add two little wrenches into the works and you have to figure out how to make it all work again.

What kinds of wrenches does a new child throw into the family works? These can include physical characteristics like race or disability and emotional needs that are expressed in acting-out behaviors, as well as the need for basic day-to-day care. It is important to consider how these factors affect the relationship between the parents.

Racial origin. Three of the children were of Vietnamese origin, one of them coming directly from Vietnam. At this early stage in placement, the transition to parenthood seemed to be far more important to parents than racial origin. Nevertheless race can have an indirect effect on the family. In the case of a two-year-old from Vietnam, both parents commented on the degree of attention showered on her because she was viewed by others as being exotic. The shift in attention from their oldest son and the increased demands the parents placed on him to help with yard chores probably fuelled his resentment. His behavior required the same kind of attention as adoptees' acting out in other families.

The new child's behavior. A potent factor in marital adaptation following adoption is the behavior of the child, especially during the testing period following placement. All older children placed for adoption have suffered disrupted attachments, some many times over. Many have been victims of abuse. More have learned behavioral patterns that served to protect them in the past, but now interfere with the establishment of enabling family relationships (Delaney & Kunstal, 1993). Some children have become expert at finding and exploiting a family's vulnerabilities (Katz, 1977). One mother, for example, said of her ten-year-old son, "He knew how to push the buttons," when he argued back at her. He also sexually targeted the nieces who

were precious to the parents. In another family, during a particularly frantic tantrum, the son lashed out at his mother, who still felt a great deal of pain around her infertility, "You're not my mother!" In both these cases, husbands were called upon for damage control: in the first to defuse escalating arguments and enforce discipline, in the second to console an anguished partner over her infertility.

Clinical literature on older-child adoption also cautions that divide-and-conquer strategies are common, with the mother usually receiving the brunt of negative behavior (Delaney & Kunstal, 1993; Keck & Kupecky, 1995). The boy who knew how to push his mother's buttons, for example, was compliant and loving with his adoptive father and with adults in the extended family. Another mother also reported that initially she saw much more of her son's negativity than her husband did, but related this to the small amount of time her husband spent at home early in the placement as a result of job demands. Two sets of parents said that in classes during the homestudy period they had been prepared for attempts at splitting and had ensured that they consulted with each other whenever behavioral problems arose. In addition, both fathers were highly involved with their children from the beginning and very supportive of their wives.

The exact changes children bring cannot be predicted because there are too many unknowns in the situation. For example, child behaviors may have been previously undocumented. Two examples will illustrate. One boy sexually touched the adoptive parents' nieces. No one had reported this kind of behavior before. In another case, a little girl behaved quite unexpectedly during the trip to her new home. As their mother told it:

> Meredith got on the plane kicking and screaming and carried by the caseworker. I mean kicking and screaming and held, bodily held into her seat. And what they were all just so

amazed at was that Meredith had never shown any of these behaviors before and she continued with some of these same things for the next month or so while she tested us. Other characteristics, while apparently innocuous, may interact in unanticipated ways with another family member's needs and expectations, as in the case of one biological child's resentment of the attention his new sister received.

Time. A pervasive factor in the post-placement adjustment for the families was time. Yet this topic is scarcely discussed in the literature on the transition to either biological or adoptive parenthood. Although families had some sense beforehand of the time constraints they would face, even those who were already parents were not fully prepared for what happened.

One of the issues in the transition to biological parenthood is the need for twenty-four-hour coverage and lack of "down time" (LaRossa, 1983). The same is true of adoption. In one mother's words: "By the end of the night it's like, 'Go to bed. Mommy wants MY time.'" And another said, "My idea of a good time is NOT having people for some of the time too." Not surprisingly, time was a recurring theme for the couple who adopted the largest sibling group. The wife pinpointed this as one of the biggest continuing difficulties early in the placement:

> I think that the thing that was so overwhelming from the start, which I still would say is one of the more overwhelming things now, is the constancy of it. No matter what happens to you and the rest of your life, you still have those three kids that you have to deal with when you come home. So that was the biggest thing and that kind of hit me--like they're still here.

When asked about the worst hassles, she replied, "Time. It involves time and just being tired, to have to always do the meal and do the laundry....Time and energy to always try to be up."

LaRossa (1983) suggests that newborns' refusal to follow time rules makes parents more aware of the clock. Much the same effect is produced by the unpredictability of children's acting-out behavior. The father of the little girl who threw the airplane tantrum spoke of the "discomfort level where you never knew for sure when the next crisis was going to break." And her mother was never certain in the early weeks "if the behavior was going to hit in the morning" or if she would have to "carry Meredith in her pyjamas to the car." (It never came to that.) In some cases, dealing with the fallout could eat up several hours. Furthermore, uncertainty around the situation only increased the stress, because parents could not know how long either the particular episode or the entire testing period would continue.

Some of the formal supports that were provided children or families also required time commitments, including in some cases considerable driving. In all, five families were involved in occupational, individual psychological, or family therapy. Interestingly no one mentioned the time demands of using such services. In an earlier study into the impact of older-child adoption on children already in the family, one very unhappy teenager included in her list of woes that they spent "hours on the road going to and from counselling" (Ward, 1986, p. 81).

The three couples who adopted siblings also talked of the time demands of the children's extracurricular activities. One father tells the tale:

> Tuesday, Tommy's got football practice. Wednesday, Claudia's got cheer leading practice. Thursday, Tommy and Claudia both have football and cheer leading, and Friday Tommy has football practice. He has football games on either Saturday or Sunday, usually on Sunday. I started working last month on Saturdays. Probably I'll just go to his game Sundays. So you figure Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday

we have something that has to be done with the kids.

Further complicating time pressures is the fact that in all but one family, both partners were employed outside the home. According to one man, "We both had moms who were home full time and now we're trying to do all the stuff that our moms did. Plus both of us are working." All mothers either took leave of absence from work immediately following placement or benefited from seasonal reduction in work demands. Two wives cut back on their work hours in the longer term. Nevertheless in spite of the time demands, there were also pay-offs from having two incomes. One couple, for example, were able to buy a more spacious home that allowed them greater privacy from the children. One man also spoke of the value of having something in life, other than children, to give a sense of proportion.

Time demands had another far-reaching effect on couple relationships--less opportunity to maintain their marriage. If they cannot find time to attend to each other, they diminish their own relationship (Delaney & Kunstal, 1993; Van Gulden & Bartels-Rabb, 1994). One father, a teacher, reported that right after placement there was "a five-minute window after the kids went to bed and we crashed" and that privacy time "went down to zilch." He also observed that "it's easy for it to get lost in the shuffle, specially when school starts again." Even when couples do find time for themselves, they need to deal with everyday logistics (who has to be where when with what) and plan strategies to manage troublesome child behavior. According to one wife, when she and her husband talked together, "It comes back to the kids quite a lot. I mean, they're a new thing. As you know with kids, they're sort of invasive." Another wife explained how children affected her relationship with her husband: "Just finding the time...to have enough time together....We're not single any more and we can't take off." Yet when they were presented with

the gift of a night away, they went to the mall and bought children's clothes. In the families I interviewed, if the demands of the children were unrelenting or if there was insufficient relief, especially during the early months of placement, parents could, and in one case did, approach emotional and physical exhaustion.

Families made a number of adjustments in order to cope with the additional time demands. The commonest was to spread the load among family members. The three couples who adopted siblings shared child care between partners to a considerable degree. One mother recruited her daughters, aged nine and eleven, to help with their new brother's reading and to teach him games; this strategy, however, left her with a larger proportion of the "work work." Some of the arrangements brought their own costs. Couples stood to lose further privacy if they had live-in help. One grandmother cared for the children after school. When the parents got home, their attention was often focused on defusing fights between her and the children. Eventually the husband started working graveyard so that he could do the after-school shift.

Social support and the marital relationship.

Although there is a wealth of information on the importance of post-placement support for adjustment to adoptive parenthood (e.g., Nelson, 1985; Sandmaier, 1988), there has been little attention to the effect of formal and informal support on the adoptive parents' marriage. Theoretically, support can have a role in preventing the physical and emotional exhaustion typical of burnout (Lieberman, 1982; Maslach, 1982; Pines, 1996;), and thus have a positive impact on all family relationships, including the marriage.

The primary support in these marriages came from the spouse, especially the husband,

both in terms of child care and behavioral management and emotional support. In her comparison of successful and disrupted older-child adoptions, Cohen (1981, p. 39) noted that the father in non-disrupted families played a pivotal role:

> He nurtured his wife and gave her support so that she would not feel inadequate....The marital unit had to be able to work as a team in a most co-operative and mutual kind of way. If they had competitive or destructive feelings towards each other, they tended not to be able to help each other.

While Cohen relates her findings to disruption, the same kind of support also benefits the marriage.

For the families I interviewed, there were a variety of supports available--informal networks like family, friends, and church, as well as formal services such as those provided by adoption workers, therapists, and visiting nurses. Adoptive family support groups, however, held no particular relevance for these couples. Only one couple had attended a meeting and they felt the problems discussed were far more serious than those they encountered.

In the cases of two families, at least, the supports available served to enhance the marriage. Parents who adopted a disabled child used some of the nursing services provided for him to enable them to spend time alone together. One couple adopting a sibling group of three also had excellent supports in place. During the early weeks, one friend was on call in the mornings in case the mother faced a crisis getting the children to school. On evenings when the husband had a night class, the same friend stayed with the mother until the children were settled. This mother also mentioned how quickly the adoption worker responded to distress calls. In addition, a therapist worked with the children. While one cannot definitely conclude that these

supports helped the marriage directly, they probably did prevent the whole adoption from collapsing, and thus avoided the kind of recriminations that may occur following disruption (cf. Barth & Berry, 1988). Perhaps more directly beneficial to their relationship was their ability to arrange a babysitting exchange with relatives so that each couple could spend time alone together.

One couple who experienced marital difficulties following placement had few supports in place prior to adoption, and those they had counted on failed. There was no back-up system during the husband's absences while he worked part of the week out-of-town -- they had planned that he would provide relief by taking over a large share of household care and child activities when he was home. When his business expanded and required him to spend more days away from home, he was unable for a time to follow through. They had also expected more support than they received from extended family members. The wife's sense of entrapment led to thoughts of, "He'll keep the kids, I'll go." Only when matters became desperate were appropriate supports put in place--a therapist, a mother's helper to allow down time, and some social life and reciprocal babysitting among neighbors.

The impact of support is not always completely positive; rather it can be mixed. As already noted, the presence of an outsider or extended family member can reduce privacy or lead to additional conflict. For the couple who adopted the boy who sexually touched their nieces, close ties with their relatives were probably a key factor in their adoption disruption. On the other hand, those same ties may well support their marriage, even following the stress of the disruption.

What was the role of adoption workers in supporting the parents' marriages? They

provided referrals for needed services, like a therapist. Probably most important was preventive work. Adoption preparation classes educated applicants about the possibility that a child might try to divide and conquer partners. Workers reminded couples of the importance of nurturing their marriages and of finding time to do so.

Achieving a new balance

In spite of changes that occurred following adoption, the couples remained the same individuals and their relationship showed continuing patterns. The consultation and banter that characterized one couple's first interview carried over into their discussions of their adoption experience and decisions about child discipline and management. Similarly the wife who was the family information seeker and agency contact kept this role. Another couple were still closely joined with their church and turned to other members for guidance. Although these examples of continuities are superficial, they illustrate the way families retained their recognizable character across the transition to adoptive parenthood.

Much the same continuity was reflected in how individuals described their marital satisfaction. Most gave a similar global rating before and after adoption. In addition, spouses usually agreed with each other. In only two cases, wives gave a somewhat lower score to the marriage during the second interview than their husbands did.

In spite of the continuity in family character, adopting an older child (or children) resulted in a new balance in the partner relationship, especially for those who had no previous children in their home. One common change reported by people doing research on biological parenthood is a shift in a couple's focus on themselves as husband and wife to themselves as

parents. This is often accompanied by a decline in couple activities, with less romance and a greater sense of partnership (e.g., Belsky, Lang, & Rovine, 1985). Almost all the adopting couples reported spending a considerable proportion of their time talking about their children, often about how to manage child behavior. Although this discussion usually focused on adoptees, for one couple, the problem was not the adoptee but their biological son. This shift to a concentration on parenthood was not necessarily perceived as negative. One father, for example, felt that the adoption marked a new closeness and partnership. When this sense of partnership fails to develop, the parent with the greater responsibility for child care may become resentful. This occurred when a mother was caring for her disabled biological child before his death and in another family when the husband needed to spend extended periods in the city and the wife was left alone to cope with the children during their principal testing period, a situation she described as being like a single parent. The shift in focus from the husband-wife to the coparent relationship does not necessarily signal a loss of the sense of couple "we-ness." Rather, it marks a redefinition. But there is a risk. Couple time can be taken up with discussions about child behavior and the busy-ness of living with children. One mother put the danger of the new focus into words:

> When they're grown, I don't want to look at him and him look at me like, "Who are you?" and say, "Goodbye"....Sometimes I worry about, will I still like him?

An important factor found to affect post-birth marital satisfaction in biological families is whether pre-birth expectations concerning division of labor have been met (Hackel & Ruble, 1992; Kalmuss, Davidson, & Cushman, 1992). Four adoptive families anticipated high levels of husband involvement with the children, and in the case of two in household chores as well. The

remaining three wives expected to be mainly responsible for child care and household work. The expectations of most families were, by and large, met. Two exceptions stand out. One wife said of her marriage, "Well, it's even better. It's absolutely better." She described how her husband, without being asked, would take over chores if she was under stress. In doing so, he exceeded her expectations for help. Both partners rated their relationship as nine or ten on a scale of one to ten. The other exception was the wife who considered leaving. Prior to the adoption, she spoke of her anxiety about becoming a *de facto* single parent:

> You really don't want to be a single parent going through this....With two kids you really need each person to pull their own weight.

When she spoke of her resentment of the two-week stretches that her husband was away on business, she stated:

> I don't blame him for being away. I know he had to be at that time. It just put an extra load that I didn't really need either....I think perhaps underlying it you think, "Listen, he got me into this. How come I'm the one that's feeling bad and he's totally happy?"

Research suggests that becoming parents tends to widen already existing differences between partners (Cowan et al., 1991). Indeed, the adoptive parents in this study believed that adoption exaggerated not only negative but also positive characteristics. For example, according to one, "I think that it certainly points out some of the weaker points of your relationship or accentuates or, um, spotlights, however you put that. I think that it also does the same to some of the stronger points of your relationship as well." And as quoted at the beginning, the adoptive father of three siblings observed: "Whenever you're in a stressful situation, it brings out the best in people, brings out their worst." Coping with the demands of adoptive parenthood did lead

some parents to a new appreciation of partners' strengths. One said, "I certainly feel a lot of respect for her, for when it was bad for her, to keep working on it." And a woman evaluated the effect of adoption on her relationship with her husband: "But you know in a way, it's strengthened because you respect the way the other parents and juggles all their things." It is certainly possible to appreciate some of the strengths of these couples --solidarity in the face of adversity, ability to consult with each other and to use each other's ideas and expertise, and commitment to their marriage and to children it has not been easy to parent.

DIRECTIONS FOR RESEARCH

It is clear that a handful of couples who have told their stories, no matter how revealing, over a year's time do not provide an adequate knowledge base for understanding what happens to the marriages of couples who adopt older children. Further short-term investigations are required to increase both the number and variety of families studied so that findings can be generalized. In addition, longitudinal studies spanning several years are needed to learn the longer-term impact of adoption on the couple relationship.

Many questions arise from these interviews, all needing additional research to further our understanding of processes in adoptive families. The short- and long-term effects of various factors in the marriage itself appear important. What has been the marital history? How does past experience affect the couple's response to stressors? What is the role of expectations? How does the couple handle time pressures? Are there discernible patterns or types in marriages that respond in different ways to stress? What are long-term effects, if any, of

temporary marital difficulties that may occur early in placement? Are they predictive of later problems? It is also important to know the impact of various non-marital factors on the couple's relationship. How does a child's acting-out behavior interact with the parents' marital history, and with their current mode of relating? Which external stressors are particularly damaging? How can their impact be ameliorated? Which social supports are most beneficial in helping a couple maintain a mutually satisfying marriage? What is the most appropriate way to ensure that these supports are available? Themes common in adoption placement literature--such as matching child and parents, grief and loss issues particularly around infertility, and social stigma--need to be related to both marital pattern and marital outcome.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Although it is impossible to generalize from the experiences of only seven couples, this study does raise a number of critical questions that both adoption practitioners and adoptive parents need to address prior to placement, during preparatory educational sessions and the homestudy process. Once a child is placed in the home, the same questions need to be asked again and again to ensure the health of the parents' marriage.

The couple relationship. (1) Does the couple have a basic sense of "we-ness"? (2) Are there clues that there is currently some breach in the sense of "we-ness"? (3) Has the couple completely shifted their focus from the marital to the parental partnership? (4) Are partners' expectations of themselves and each other realistic?

Time factor. (1) Has the couple realistically considered the time demands of the adoption they are contemplating? (2) Has the couple arranged for "down time"?

Support systems. (1) What support systems do the couple have in place before the child arrives? (2) Are the planned support systems appropriate and effective? (3) What is the anticipated cost/benefit balance of a proposed support? (4) Do adoption professionals support only the placement in a narrow sense, or do they also support the parents' marriage? Indeed, such support is synonymous with supporting the adoption.

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